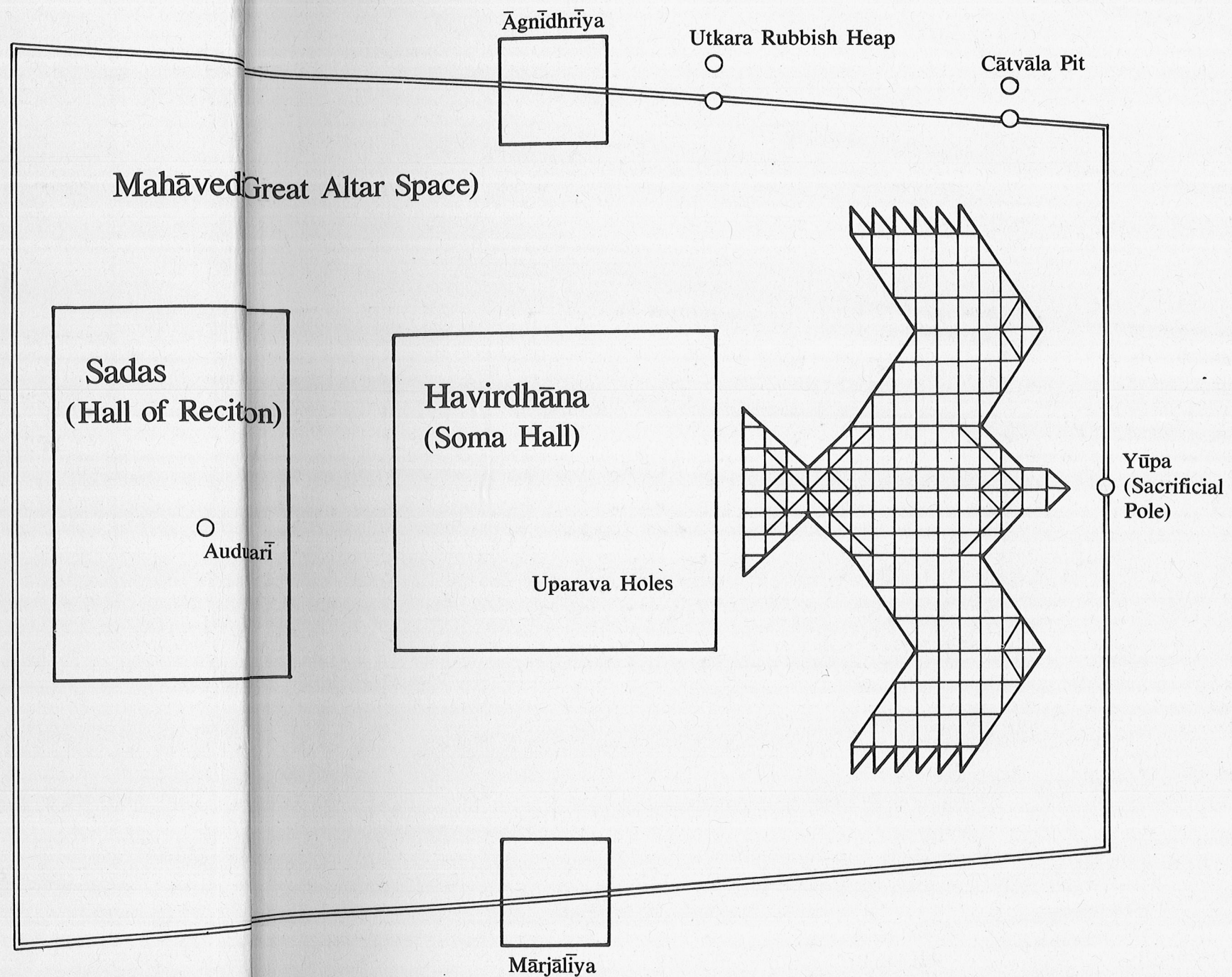
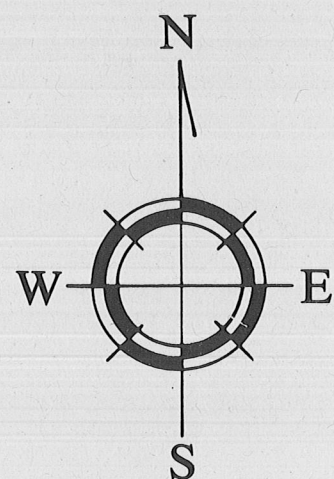
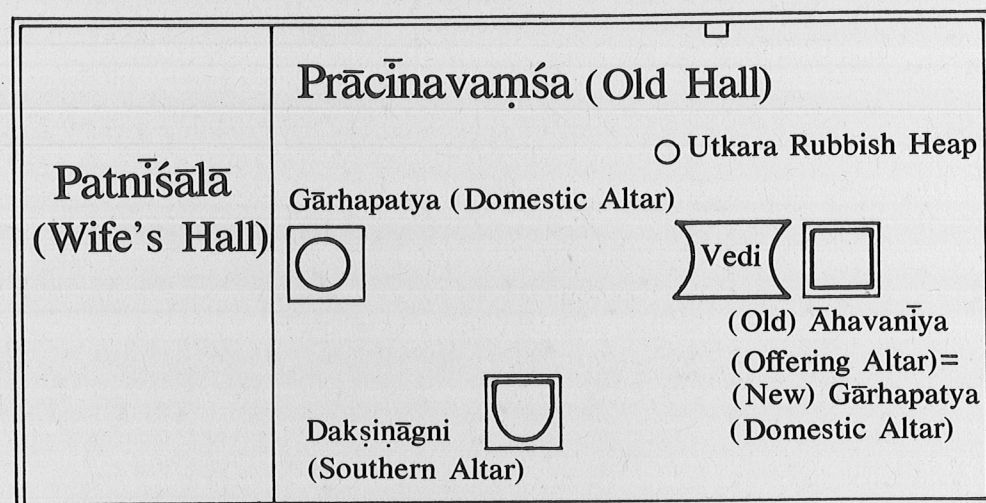




अग्नये इदं न मम ।
This is for Agni, not for me

AGNI

THE VEDIC RITUAL OF THE FIRE ALTAR

VOLUME I

by Frits Staal

in collaboration with
C.V. Somayajipad and
M. Itti Ravi Nambudiri

Photographs by Adelaide deMenil

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PREFACE

IN 1955 I VISITED for the first time a traditional Nambudiri Brahmin home in a small village in southwest India. We sat on the verandah, which was spotlessly clean. Hospitality is a virtue common all over Asia, but my hosts' generosity was overwhelming. Delicious vegetarian dishes were served by the eldest son—mounds of rice surrounded by preparations made from a variety of vegetables, spices, pickles, and fruits, among which I recognized cocoanut, ginger, mango, and banana. I ate all these from a banana leaf on the floor by myself, watched with undisguised curiosity by the male members of the family. Earlier, I had bathed in a corner of the garden where numerous buckets of water were made available. These were followed by a towel and a *mundū*, the garment of unbleached cotton that the Malabar District Gazetteer describes as "a white cloth tied round the waist, tucked in on the right side, and hanging loose to the ground." I sometimes saw women's eyes through a window; more rarely, an elephant in the compound. At that time, though a student of the Vedānta, or "End of the Vedas," I knew little about the Vedas. I considered them ancient and distant, and it would hardly have occurred to me to connect them with my charming hosts. As it turned out, they spent most of their time bathing or engaged in Vedic ritual when I was not sharing their company.

During my second visit I was armed with a tape recorder, an upright Philips machine of ample weight and dimensions, which Professor van Buitenen had used in Poona, and which belonged to the Netherlands Organization for Pure Research (Z.W.O.). My heart sank whenever a little boy carried it on his head across a river. I recorded Kathakali and other Malayalam songs, a concerto by a famous singer, and increasing amounts of Vedic recitation and chant. One result of these early researches was my book *Nambudiri Veda Recitation*, published in 1961.

Visits to Kerala of irregular duration followed in more rapid succession. In 1962 I was accompanied by J. E. B. Gray of the School of Oriental and African Studies. We made complete recordings, lasting some thirty hours, of the *R̥gveda* recitations, *Sāmaveda* chants, and *Yajurveda* formulas that accompany the *Agniṣṭoma*, a ritual celebration that lasts five days. We did not witness any such ritual. The brahmins recited and chanted for our tape recorder, and the occasion was to them like a general rehearsal. We tried to gain access to a real performance, but none was at hand, and we would not have been allowed in any case. One Nambudiri offered to organize a faithful imitation of the ceremony, to be performed for our sakes, but we declined.

In the sixties, some leading Nambudiris became concerned about the weakening and possible disappearance of their Vedic traditions. At the same

PREFACE

time I began to urge that their largest ceremony, the twelve-day *Atirātra-Agnicayana*, which had occurred in 1956 and had never been witnessed by outsiders, should be performed once more so that it could be filmed and recorded. After years of intermittent discussion, in which Professor E. R. Sreekrishna Sarma and Dr. Asko Parpola participated, the Nambudiris agreed. They asked only that in exchange for being given the privilege of attending, filming, and recording the performance, scholars help defray the cost of the ritual. The Agnicayana was performed from April 12 to 24, 1975. The circumstances that led to this performance are related in greater detail in the second volume of this book ("The Agnicayana Project": Part III, pages 456-475).

Over the decades, while I was beginning to penetrate the riches of their Vedic heritage, I made many Nambudiri friends and came to know them better. I found them sincere, straightforward, and disinclined to take themselves too seriously. After initial reluctance, they are eager to explain the intricacies of their recitations, chants, and ceremonies; they never claim knowledge they don't really possess; they will not preach or become pompous, and express no interest in coming to America. Though no longer adverse to modernization, they remain attached to their simple habits. Stripped of former privileges, they have preserved their ability to practice the art of living. This book is offered to them with the wish that material progress will not destroy that rare ability.

Agni is not only fire and the name of a God, but also the name of the Agnicayana ceremony itself, and the name of the bird-shaped altar constructed during that ceremony. This book deals with Agni in all these forms. It is not a book primarily made from books, but derives, in the first place, from my Nambudiri friends. It would be difficult to list all those who have helped to make it possible over the years. The expertise described in the following pages is extensive and varied, and is embodied in a sizable section of the community. For example, in the course of the long Agnicayana ceremony, the ritual implements of another rite (the pastoral Pravargya) have to be put on the altar in the shape of a man. One person knew precisely how this should be done. When the chief priest was about to perform the rite, he appeared and demonstrated it.

PLATE 85

Without being able to thank all, let me pay tribute to four Nambudiris upon whom I have always relied and who, at the time of writing, are in their seventies. Two of them have directly collaborated with me in the present volume, especially in its Part II: Cherumukku (Cērumukku) Vaidikan Vallabhan Somayājipad and Muṭṭatukkāṭṭu Itti Ravi Nambudiri.

Cherumukku Vaidikan, or C.V. as he is respectfully called, occupies a central position in the ritual realm of the Ṛg- and Yajurveda. He is the leading force of one of the two Vaidika families who continue to perform the large rituals. He carries his knowledge lightly, but his authority is unquestioned.

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He has a formidable mind, combined with an efficiency that is rare. He arranged for the Agniṣṭoma recordings of 1962, and when the preparations for the 1975 performance (originally planned for 1974) were about to collapse, the situation could only be saved—and was saved—through his power and decisive action.

Itti Ravi, as he is affectionately called, is the undisputed master of the Jaiminiya Sāmaveda, the school of Sāmaveda that survives primarily among the Nambudiris. He has devoted his life to the maintenance of the tradition of these chants: he reconstructed from his memory, with the help of his pupils, those that were on the verge of being forgotten, had them recorded whenever there was an opportunity, and committed them to writing. Thanks to his constant activity the materials are now at hand, and the only unpublished school of the Vedas is ready for publication. It was my good fortune to meet Itti Ravi during my first visit to Kerala. Ever since, I have learned and recorded from him. The extent of his knowledge is as phenomenal as the length of his breath.

One of my oldest friends is Māṭampū Narayanan Nambudiri, B.A., B.L. After early training in his native Yajurveda, he took to the study of law and became an advocate. Like C.V. and Itti Ravi, he was politically active and took part in the Nambudiri Yogakṣema Mahāśabhā, an organization concerned with the modernization of the Nambudiri caste system. Since he was opposed to animal sacrifice and refused to attend rites that involved such sacrifice, the 1975 performance was the first of its kind that he witnessed. His Gandhian attitude did not diminish his enthusiasm for Vedic culture, and this zeal, combined with a modern outlook, made him a valuable ally in bridging the gaps between my plans and reality, and between sometimes opposing factions.

The doyen of Nambudiri scholars is Ērkkara Rāman Nambudiri. In 1966, he recited the Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa for its editor, E. R. Sreekrishna Sarma. In 1976 his book *Āmnāyamathanam*, "The Kindling of Tradition," was published in Malayalam. Another book on *ekāha*, *ahina*, and *sattra* is about to appear. As long as Ērkkara failed to support, for respectable reasons, our desire to film a Vedic ritual, there was nothing that could be done about it. However, it is characteristic of him that when he changed his mind and came to feel that there is merit in having on film and tape what otherwise might be irretrievably lost, he also assumed full and active responsibility. In spite of his indifferent health, he consented to be present inside the sacrificial enclosure throughout the ceremonies, so that all could benefit from his deep knowledge and wide experience.

The 1975 performance was organized by Cherumukku Vaidikan and Itti Ravi Nambudiri. Their responsibilities and roles will become apparent in the course of this work. Our collaboration at the writing stage is easily described. The description of the performance in Part II of the present

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volume was written in drafts that were separately submitted to C.V. and Itti Ravi for their scrutiny. They then sent me their corrections and additions. Many of these exchanges took place through correspondence, but fortunately I have been able to sit at their feet again in the course of this work, and after the manuscript had begun to take shape. These sessions were not confined to the correction of what I had written. They induced me to reorganize the material so as to express its structure more clearly, and to incorporate new facts and insights. For example, much of the information on measurements and the ritual enclosure in the "Preliminaries" (Part II) derives from days spent with Itti Ravi in 1977. Late in 1978, the Smithsonian Institution enabled me to go to India once more and to consult with my collaborators for the last time before the manuscript would be completed. Some of the additional results of this trip are presented in three chapters of Part III (in the second volume). As a result of our close and extended collaboration I can now assert with confidence, that Part II of the book exhibits a major part of C.V.'s and Itti Ravi's combined knowledge of the ritual. The occurrence of their names on the title page is therefore not merely decorative. At the same time, I alone am responsible for mistakes that remain.

My indebtedness to others, hardly less numerous, is for support that has also been indispensable. When the Nambudiris had decided to permit the performance to be studied and documented, an international committee was set up, consisting of Professors R. N. Dandekar and C. G. Kashikar (Poona), Klaus Mylius (Leipzig), Asko Parpola (Helsinki), V. Raghavan (Madras), E. R. Sreekrishna Sarma (Tirupati), J. A. B. van Buitenen (Chicago), and myself as chairman. Dr. Parpola initiated the correspondence, which soon grew into formidable proportions. We invoked the assistance of Vedic scholars all over the world, and the response was invariably positive. Among the enthusiastic supporters was Dr. Pierre Rolland, whose tragic and untimely death occurred in 1974.

The first preparations began to take shape. Dr. Kashikar provided a 30-page description of the Agnicayana, based upon *śrauta sūtras*, *śulba sūtras*, and *prayogas*. Dr. Parpola provided a list of the *sāman* chants from Jaiminiya sources, which was later supplemented and extended by Itti Ravi. Cherumukku Vaidikan gave an oral description, in Malayalam, of the sequence of rites to Professor Sreekrishna Sarma, who translated this into English in a pamphlet of 21 pages. Professor J. C. Heesterman from Leiden visited Berkeley during January-March, 1975, lectured on the Agnicayana section (Chapter 10) of *Baudhāyana Śrauta Sūtra*, and helped me to prepare a booklet of instructions for the cameramen. Mr. J. E. B. Gray, London, prepared from our recordings a full transcript of the recitations of the Soma-pressing day. I wrote a general pamphlet on the study of Vedic ritual, to be used in approaching foundations.

I felt strongly that the filming and recording should not be done by Sanskrit scholars, but be in professional hands. Thus started the research for

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technical assistance and, at the same time, financial support. I have always hated begging for money, which has become a very time-consuming part of all large scholarly projects. Financial support was particularly hard to obtain in the seventies for projects that were not fashionable, or were considered to lack practical utility or "relevance."

Operating from Berkeley—with the advice and assistance of Dr. Mark Juergensmeyer, and with the help of the administrative staff of the Center and the Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies—I approached numerous foundations and individuals, generally without tangible result. Fortunately, we were assisted not only by the members of the executive committee, but also by other scholars from all over the world. I should like in particular to mention the active participation of Professors A. Scharpé (Belgium), C. von Fürer-Haimendorf and J. E. B. Gray (England), N. Nakada and N. Tsuji (Japan), J. Gonda and J. C. Heesterman (Netherlands), T. Asch and E. C. Dimock (U.S.A.), and W. Rau (West Germany). This worldwide network resulted in the following grants, donations, and commitments:

Smithsonian Institution, U.S.A. (in rupees)	\$49,449
The Rock Foundation	40,261
National Endowment for the Humanities, U.S.A.	15,000
Netherlands Organization for Pure Research (WOTRO/ZWO):	
Dfl. 30,000	12,300
School of Oriental and African Studies, London: £1500	3,495
Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft: DM 6,650	2,860
University of Gent, Belgium: francs 65,000	1,672
Dr. Asko Parpola, Helsinki	1,000
Professor N. Tsuji, Tokyo	1,000
Mr. S. Iwamoto, Tsurumi University: ¥50,000	170

I am especially indebted to the Smithsonian Institution, The Rock Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, not only because their contributions were the largest, but also because they sustained their interest in the project and continued to support us on later occasions.

In the meantime, the Government of India had been approached through the Indian Consulate-General in San Francisco, the Indian Embassy in Washington, Dr. Dandekar and Dr. Raghavan. Following the enthusiastic support of Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, the Government of India expressed great interest in the project and agreed to provide the necessary permissions and facilitate the importation of equipment.

The rupee grant from the Smithsonian Institution, authorized by the Government of India, was administered through the American Institute of Indian Studies. Mr. P. R. Mehendiratta of the Institute put all the facilities of his office at our disposal and helped with the administration of the project, its financial implementation, and the processing of numerous docu-

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ments. His participation in the project started in 1974, and he continued to provide background support from New Delhi throughout the actual performance. A detailed financial report on the rupee grant was prepared at his Delhi office. Some information on our budgets will be provided in the account of "The Agnicayana Project" in the second volume.

Late in 1974, I secured the participation of Professor Robert Gardner of the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies, Harvard University. Henceforward the direction of films and still photography, and indeed the supervision of the entire visual and sound effort, was in his hands. Gardner and I visited Kerala in December 1974, made the final arrangements, concluded agreements with the performers, and initiated a period of active consultation and cooperation that continued without interruption for the next four months.

When the performance started on April 12, 1975, I began to realize that there were many basic things I did not know. I came to understand only then what is meant when we say that ritual is "activity" (*karman*). Ritual is not a thing that can be easily understood if one only has access to texts. More importantly, whatever texts may say, language does not explain such activity. It is we who ask for explanations in terms of linguistic expressions. For the ritualists, action comes first, and action, which includes recitation and chant, is all that counts. Now, however, a curious convergence became apparent, for the same holds for cameramen, photographers, and sound engineers. Textual scholars will find it hard to understand how much I learned about Vedic ritual by seeing how Robert Gardner, who until then had known nothing about it, set about to film it. Despite the time we had spent preparing for the event, the rites generally took me by surprise. We could not enter the ritual enclosure, and it was not always possible to see clearly. Earphones enabled me to hear what was going on inside while it was being recorded on tape. All in all, I was often lost. In confusion, I would look for Gardner, who was always where the action was, filming it with his assistants there, while Adelaide deMenil was doing the still photography. I am grateful to them, therefore, not only for providing massive documentation, but also for making me see.

While most of the films were shot by Gardner and Kevin Burke, they were assisted for sound by Kunju Vasudevan Nambudiripad and Professor M. Narayanan Nambudiripad, who, unlike all non-Nambudiris, could enter the enclosure. The film crew consisted, in addition, of Mankada Ravi Varma and Sarwesh Kumar. Most of the still photographs were taken by Adelaide deMenil, and a fair number by Dr. Parpola and Dr. Ikari. Professor Edmund Carpenter assisted with the technical organization, made sketches and measurements of sacrificial implements, and collected information of various kinds. Professors N. A. Jairazbhoy, E. Carpenter, and myself were in charge of the sound recordings, sometimes helped by other visitors, e.g., Dr. Romila Thapar. More detailed information about our equipment and mode of

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operation will be provided in the second volume.

We returned with almost 80 hours of recorded tape, 20 hours of color film, more than 4,000 still photographs (color and black/white), a set of sacrificial implements (now in my Berkeley office), and abundant notes, sketches, and drawings. The first need was for an inventory of these materials. Back in Berkeley I began with the 20 hours of film. I had access to a balky Moviola editing console for less than a month, and prepared 78 pages of tentative annotations with the assistance of Harold Arnold, my wife Saraswathy, and (for the Pravargya) Wayne Surdam. The first draft of the annotations was completed by August, 1975, and an abridged outline is published below (Part V, in the second volume). These annotations were used in preparing the 45-minute film "Altar of Fire," produced by Robert Gardner and myself and released early in 1977. In the meantime I also learned to find my way in the mass of tapes and photographs, though until now there has not been sufficient time to prepare a proper catalogue.

The way was now paved for writing up the results. During 1976-1977, this work was made possible through the assistance of a research grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. I started with an analysis of the background, which resulted in Part I of the present volume ("The Agnicayana Ritual"). In this part, limited use is made of the data collected in India. Though my primary inclination is to work in the field, this first part could not have been written had I not been in residence at Berkeley. Our Berkeley Campus not only provides incessant intellectual stimulation, but its athletic facilities preserved my ability to transport books, films, and tapes, and prevented me from getting stiff when spending long hours at my desk. Also, Berkeley still houses some of those almost legendary scholars who combine insight with the unfailing control over large masses of facts. A telephone conversation with Edward Schafer, for example, provides precise answers to numerous questions in a matter of minutes. Our library would yield such information only grudgingly and after weeks or months of frustration.

I am therefore especially grateful to some of my Berkeley colleagues: Professors Murray B. Emeneau and George L. Hart of South Asian Studies for things Dravidian; J. K. Anderson, Thomas Rosenmeyer, and Michael Nagler of Classics for Greek; Leonard Lesko and Martin Schwartz of Near Eastern Studies for Egyptian and Indo-Iranian, respectively; Edward H. Schafer of Oriental Languages and Raymond N. Tang of the East Asiatic Library for Chinese. Robert F. Heizer of Anthropology has taught me most of what I now know about fire by generously providing a pile of offprints. Lewis and Lois Lancaster have helped me with Buddhism and pottery, respectively, and Margaret Lock has assisted me with Shamanism. Ned K. Johnson and his associates at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology—Mercedes S. Foster and Steve Bailey—have informed me about birds. Joseph H.

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Peck, Jr., of the Museum of Paleontology, has helped me with fossil ammonites. Richard Reeder of the Department of Geology and Geophysics identified the "chicken-fish" pebbles.

From outside the Berkeley campus I also received a great deal of assistance, especially in connection with publications. For this I should like to thank Robert Gardner and his assistant Hope Norwood at Harvard, J. E. B. Gray in London, Jeff Masson in Toronto, Don B. Griffin in Tuscaloosa, and Barbara Miller and Dorothy Norman in New York. My indebtedness to the articles that appear in Part III of the second volume will be apparent at the appropriate place. Special interest attaches to the translation of the 10th chapter of Baudhāyana Śrauta Sūtra by Yasuke Ikari and Harold Arnold in Part IV of the second volume.

In preparing the text of Part II, which constitutes the bulk of the first volume, I derived much help from all the articles and documents that had been prepared, and from the numerous Vedic texts and related publications, with which Vedic scholars are already familiar. However, the following description is principally based upon the materials we brought back from India. With the help of my own field notes I went repeatedly through our recordings, films (now available as videotape cassettes), and photographs. Whenever there was a discrepancy between the ancient texts and our own field data, I recorded the latter, checking explicitly with Cherumukku Vaidikan[or Itti Ravi if there seemed to be any reason for doubt. The reader should not jump to the conclusion, therefore, that unfamiliar forms are "mistakes," even if elementary rules of the language seem to be disregarded, as for example in *agnaye idam na mama*, "this is for Agni, not for me" (see below page 47).

While the Atirātra-Agnicayana unfolded itself in my mind in all its splendor and perplexity, the manuscript began to grow. Dr. Ruth-Inge Heinze helped me to edit the manuscript and typed large portions of it in exemplary fashion. Ruth Suzuki typed the latter portions with fantastic speed and accuracy. My wife Saraswathy helped me in matters of style. Yvonne Kins, Helen Tu, Keith Jefferds, and Pamela MacFarland assisted in numerous ways, including style, references, and books. Adrienne Morgan prepared the illustrations in the text and the maps—a difficult task that she executed with expertise and imagination, as a glance at Figures 27–36, for example, will show.

A difficult dilemma was whether to include in the description of the ritual the text and translation of the numerous recitations and chants. A simple alternative would be to merely refer to them by means of the numerous abbreviations customary among Vedists. It might be argued that, since the participants do not often understand them, it would be best to delete the texts. Be that as it may, they certainly *know* them. To omit them and confine oneself to references would not only give the book the appearance of a telephone directory, it would also do an injustice to the performance, and be useless to nonspecialists. I accordingly decided to provide something, and

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the next question was whether to provide texts, translations, or both. To omit the original form, which is ritually significant, would almost be sacrilege. Moreover, most readers, when presented with Sanskrit forms, would want to know their meaning. In the case of many of the chants, and recitations such as the *ṣoḍaśin*, "the sixteenth," there is no meaning, and so there was no problem. In the remaining cases, the great majority, I reluctantly decided to provide the text together with a translation into English. In preparing the texts I was helped by Pamela MacFarland, Professors R. N. Dandekar and T. N. Dharmadhikari, Poona, and Professors E.R. Sreekrishna Sarma and S. Sankaranarayanan, Tirupati.

In translating the texts I received a great deal of assistance. My first thanks go to Professor Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, who helped me with translations from the Ṛgveda. Neither of us is a specialist in Indo-European, one requirement for the traditional Vedic philologist. Both of us feel, however (as she says in the Introduction to her Anthology from the Ṛgveda: Penguin Classic, 1981) that "there is so much in the Ṛgveda to interest and excite non-Vedists, it seems a shame to let it go on being the treasure of a tiny, exclusive group, hidden as it is behind the thorny wall of an ancient and cryptic language." The difficulties, however, are formidable: "As a result, there are places where the reader may be puzzled. Good. The hymns are meant to puzzle, to surprise, to trouble the mind; they are often just as puzzling in Sanskrit as they are in English."

One of the main features of the Atirātra-Agnicayana—its huge dimensions—made itself felt in connection with the translations. Wendy could not cover more than a relatively small portion because of her other commitments and the daunting distance between Berkeley and Chicago. I decided, therefore, to follow existing translations in many cases, even though they are often unsatisfactory. I changed them whenever I felt I knew how they should be changed, and in all cases sought to improve their readability. This applies especially to Keith's translation of the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā*, which is in biblical English. The Ṛgveda translation by Geldner is in German, and that by Renou, almost complete, in French. Several other texts have been translated by others, and some have remained untranslated. All required a lot of work.

In polishing the English translations I was helped by several students: Dennis Lahey, Wayne Surdam, and especially Pamela MacFarland. When the work was nearing completion, I learned that Professor Stanley Insler of Yale was translating the Ṛgveda and had completed nearly half of it. He graciously offered to look through my translations, not only of the Ṛgveda, but of all the recited texts. Again, the mass of the material constituted a stumbling block. Stanley scrutinized more than half the translations, and offered me corrections and suggestions for improvement. He spent a great deal of time, but it became clear that he could not complete the work without sacrificing every other task in which he was engaged. It is also frustrating for a skilled translator to correct the efforts of an unskilled colleague instead of

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offering fresh translations of his own. Fortunately, there were several verses and hymns of the Ṛgveda that Professor Insler had already translated. Adding numerous others, he has given me permission to include and publish here for the first time the following Ṛgvedic verses that underlie the 29 *stuti* chants of the Atirātra:

<i>stuti</i>	<i>Ṛgveda source</i>
1 (<i>bahispavamāna</i>)	RV 9.62.25–27; 9.61.28–30; 9.66.10–12
2	RV 1.12.1–3
3	RV 1.23.4–6
4	RV 1.7.1–2,4
5	RV 7.94.4–6
6	RV 9.61.10; 9.54.1; 9.61.11–12; 9.107.4–5; 9.87.1–3
7	RV 9.64.1–2
8	RV 4.31.1–3
9	RV 8.49.1–2
10	RV 8.66.1–2
11	RV 9.1.1–3; 9.63.7; 9.65.25; 9.101.1–2; 9.75.1–3
12	RV 6.48.1–2
13	RV 6.16.16–18
14	RV 8.21.1–2
15	RV 8.98.7–9
16	see pages 660–663
17	RV 8.92.1–3
18	RV 7.31.1–3
19	RV 8.2.16–18
20	RV 8.92.19–21
21	RV 8.17.11–13
22	RV 8.81.1–3
23	RV 8.45.22–24
24	RV 8.2.1–3
25	RV 3.51.10,12,11
26	RV 1.5.1–3
27	RV 1.30.7–9
28	RV 8.13.1–3
29	RV 7.16.1–2; 7.81.1–2; 7.74.1–2.

Stanley Insler has also contributed the translation of the text of the first *śastra* recitation by the hotā priest (RV 8.48.3–4; 3.13.1–7) and the *varuṇa-praghāsa* verses (RV 10.176.2–4; 3.29.4; 6.15.16; 3.29.8; 2.9.1–2) recited by the hotā during the Carrying Forth of Agni (Episode 20). Stanley's translation are recognized at a glance: he uses "thy," "thou," and "thee," where

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I would have "you". These discrepancies happen to illustrate the gap between Ṛgveda and Yajurveda, which is of the same order as that between Shakespeare and contemporary American literature.

I am grateful to all who have helped me with the considerable amount of translation *Agni* has required. Excluding the translations by Stanley Insler, I bear the final responsibility for the form in which the translations now appear. In conclusion, I would like to adopt, and extend to the Yajurveda, what van Buitenen said in his description of the Pravargya (1968, 54): "My colleagues will understand that my renderings . . . do not pretend in any way to be definitive. There is hardly a line in the Ṛgveda which does not present its own problems. . . . It was my intention at least to show what *kind* of hymns were recited at the ritual and I have hoped for at least a fair approximation of their contents."

Apart from Vedic Sanskrit, there are a few translations from Malayalam, the native language of the Nambudiris. With respect to these I have been helped most by Professor E.R. Sreekrishna Sarma. He has also established the text and translated the long "Praiśārtha" addressed to the patron of the ritual on the occasion of his consecration. Dr. N. S. Mooss, Vayaskara, Kottayam, helped me with the names and identification of plants and trees.

The year following the completion of the text, 1979, was disastrous for Sanskritists and Oriental scholars generally. Four scholars of worldwide fame, including two members of our international committee and two contributors to the second volume of this book, passed away within the span of six months. Professor V. Raghavan, doyen of Indian Sanskritists, died on April 6, 1979. Professor C. Hooykaas, the leading authority on the religion of Bali, died on August 13, 1979. Professor J.A.B. van Buitenen, still engaged in his translation of the Mahābhārata, died on September 21, 1979. Professor N. Tsuji, dean of Japanese Sanskritists and Vedic ritualists as well, died on September 24, 1979. We who remain pull closer together in a vain attempt to fill the gaps.

While I was preparing the manuscript for the press, I was searching for a publisher. I had no success, even though I had started the search as early as 1975. One reason for this lack of results was that I felt that the book I had in mind should be illustrated with plates, using the beautiful photographs made by Adelaide deMenil in black and white as well as in color. This feeling reflected my growing conviction that ritual should not merely be read about, but should also be seen, and—if possible—heard. I was unwilling to compromise by proposing to sacrifice either comprehensiveness or quality, feeling that the excellent materials brought back from India deserved a definitive scholarly account, with adequate presentation of information, texts, pictures and—if possible—sound.

There was another reason for my lack of success in finding a publisher. Until the National Endowment for the Humanities decided to support publication costs, it was relatively easy to obtain money for projects in the

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humanities, and almost impossible to find support for publishing them. The assumption was, apparently, that university publishers would take care of the manuscripts. However, this had long ceased to be the case. No one can keep up with the avalanche of manuscripts that the ideology of publish or perish has unleashed.

Since producing the book I had in mind would be expensive, I had to find the money. I wrote more letters than I care to recall. In approaching publishers and foundations, I received help from Berkeley's Chancellor Bowker and from the Berkeley Foundation of the University of California. I also corresponded with UNESCO and with the Government of India. There are great similarities between these three bureaucracies, and we reached a point where I was uncertain whether their wheels were still moving, or had ground to a halt. In 1978, when despair was near the Rock Foundation donated \$90,000 to enable me to transform the almost completed manuscript into a spectacular book. There were no formalities, no application procedures, no reports, and in no time the arrangements were completed. Disputes arose, however, over a number of subjects, chief among them the Rock Foundation's claim that Asian Humanities Press had misused the grant funds by spending them for ordinary working capital purposes rather than conserving and using them only for the material production cost of *Agni*. The publisher did not deny using the grant funds in this manner, but contended that it had the right to do so provided that it could replace them with other funds when needed. Both sides retained legal counsel. Numerous discussions ensued among the foundation, the publisher, the University of California as the formal grant recipient, and myself. The Rock Foundation was represented by Edward M. Stadum, and it is through his efforts that these negotiations were brought to a successful conclusion and publication was finally achieved.

I owe a great debt to Dr. Muneo Tokunaga who checked the Sanskrit texts, to Professor R. N. Dandekar who supervised their printing at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona, and to Mrs. B. S. Staal who assisted with the preparation of the indexes. Insiders will note that these volumes are to some extent inspired by Gordon Wasson's book on Soma. This is as it should be, for Agni and Soma are the closest of ritual companions. Moreover, I value not only Wasson's book and his friendship, but admire the boldness of his hypothesis, and agree with him that Vedic culture is too important to be left to the Vedists.

I am deeply indebted to Adelaide deMenil, who made the photographs of the 1975 performance, and permitted me to select and use what I wanted. Two plates were provided by Dr. Asko Parpola from his photographs taken on the same occasion. I am grateful to him, to Professor Cyril Birch and Kuo Li-ying for photographs they made in the People's Republic of China and in Japan, respectively, and to Professor George Dales, who drew Plates 22-32 and helped with the description of ritual implements. Grateful acknow-

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ledgement for the use of illustrations is also made to Ajit Mookerjee, London and New Delhi; Professor G. R. Sharma, Allahabad; the Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei, Republic of China, where I was helped in particular by Miss Wang Ch'ing-hung, Mr. Liu Tang-ping, and Mr. Mark Landes; the E.M. Scrutton Collection, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; the Archaeological Survey of India; and the American Oriental Society. I thank Louis T. Judson for helping me produce the tape cassettes that accompany these volumes, another delicate and time-consuming task.

The University of California, and in particular the two departments of Philosophy and of South and Southeast Asian Studies, have repeatedly allowed me to be absent, and at most other times made do with my physical presence when my mind was in the Agnicayana. The same holds for my students and my family, so much so that my son Nanoo, before he could properly talk, already referred to the ritual as "ugly China." I am truly grateful to my colleagues, students, and family for granting me such privileges, without which it would not have been possible to complete this book.

Finally I should give vent to a question that I have sometimes asked myself. Why should I, a philosopher and Sanskritist, have spent years of my life with an obsolete ceremony? Am I weary of the present? Or am I merely tired of words and meanings, and have turned to sounds and activities? If I look at the issue negatively, this may be so, though my turning is still a turning of words. However, from a positive point of view, I have long stood in awe of this unique survival, so archaic yet so sophisticated, so close to the early history of man, and so lovingly preserved through millennia that elsewhere saw the birth and death of entire civilizations. While pyramids, temples, cathedrals, and skyscrapers were built and fell into decay, languages and religions came and went, and innumerable wars were fought, the Vedas and their ritual continued to be transmitted by word of mouth, from teacher to pupil, and from father to son. What a triumph of the human spirit over the limitations of matter and the physical body! A continuity verging on immortality—though not of any individual person. And so I found myself involved not merely in the past, but in the present and the future as well. A curious combination of circumstances and accidents put me in touch with this venerable tradition, and then in almost complete possession and control of its physical manifestations on tape, plate, and film. The time had come for the leading Nambudiri ritualists to be willing, indeed eager, to reveal and elucidate to me these cultural treasures, which had always been hidden from outsiders. Here was a unique opportunity, indeed a responsibility, to continue the oral tradition by means of a book. Here was something for which I was so well placed and equipped that I could almost believe that only I could do it. I was fortunate and responded to the challenge as a matter of course.

Transliteration SANSKRIT

अ a	इ i	ऋ ṛ	ऌ ḷ	उ u
आ ā	ई ī	ॠ ṝ		ऊ ū
	ए e			ओ o
	ऐ ai			औ au
क ka	च ca	ट ṭa	त ta	प pa
ख kha	छ cha	ठ ṭha	थ tha	फ pha
ग ga	ज ja	ड ḍa	द da	ब ba
घ gha	झ jha	ढ ḍha	ध dha	भ bha
ङ ṅ	ञ ña	ण ṇa	न na	म ma
	य ya	र ra	ल la	व va
ह ha	श śa	ष ṣa	स sa	
अः aḥ		ळ ḷa		अं am

TRANSLITERATIONS MALAYALAM

അ a	ഇ i	ഈ ī	ഊ ū	ഉ u
ആ ā	ഈ ī			ഊ ū
	എ e	ഈ ē	ഒ o	ഓ ō
		ഈ ai		ഔ au
ക ka	ച ca	ട ṭa	ത ta	പ pa
ഖ kha	ഛ cha	ഠ ṭha	ഥ tha	ഫ pha
ഗ ga	ജ ja	ഡ ḍa	ദ da	ബ ba
ഘ gha	ഝ jha	ഢ ḍha	ധ dha	ഭ bha
ങ ṅa	ഞ ña	ണ ṇa	ന na	മ ma
	യ ya	ര ra	ല la	വ va
ഹ ha	ശ śa	ഷ ṣa	സ sa	
അഃ aḥ	ഈ īa	ഈ īa	ഊ ūa, tta	അം am

A Note on Pronunciation

THE NAMBU DIRI PRONUNCIATION of Sanskrit and the pronunciation of Malayalam are similar. Special features of Veda recitation are mentioned separately (page 173). In general, in Sanskrit and Malayalam, vowels are pronounced as in Italian or Japanese. They are short (*a, i, u, r, l*) or long, that is, twice as long as the short ones (*ā, ī, ū, ē, o, ai, au*). The consonant *r* is pronounced as in Italian, while the vowels *r* and *l* contain a vocalic element similar to the short *i* in the third syllable of English *ability*. Among the consonants, there is a series of dentals (*t, th, d, dn, n, s*) and a corresponding series of retroflexes or cerebrals (*ṭ, ṭh, ḍ, ḍh, ṇ, ṣ*). The former are produced when the tip of the tongue touches the teeth (as in French), the latter when the tongue is bent backward and touches the palate (the English pronunciation of *t, d, n*, and *s* is more or less in between). In the Sanskrit *s* and *ṣ*, the tongue points in the same respective directions, but breath passes over it. The palatals are pronounced when the tongue touches the front of the palate: *c* as in English *chair*; *j* as in *jar*; *ñ* as in Spanish; and *ś* as in *sheet*. The aspirates (*kh, gh, ch, jh, ṭh, ḍh, th, dh, ph, bh*) are pronounced with a clearly audible release of breath following the consonant: *th* as in *anthill*; *dh* as in *bald-head*, etc. The *m* expresses nasalization of the preceding vowel. The Nambudiri *h* sounds almost like the *ch* in German *ach* (which is different from the pronunciation elsewhere in India, which is like an *h* followed by a short echo of the preceding vowel). In Yajurveda, *h* sounds fully like German or Arabic *ch*, when followed by *k*. In Yajurveda and Sāmaveda it sounds like *f* when followed by *p*. The *ṛ* is pronounced like *ng*. Most other consonants are pronounced as in English.

Malayalam sounds differ from Sanskrit in several respects. Under certain conditions, the dentals are pronounced like alveolars, as in English, where the tip of the tongue touches the upper ridge of the teeth, close to the palate. The *ḷa*, which is characteristic of the Jaiminiya Sāmaveda, is pronounced like *r* in American English, but further back. The *ḷa* is retroflex, the *ra* is palatal, and the *ṭṭa* is similar to the double *t* in English *attention*. Many words in Malayalam end in a short vowel, like the vowel between English *but* and French *tu*. This is transliterated as *u*.

Unlike English, Sanskrit differentiates between the stem of a noun (e.g., *agni, viṣṇu, savitr*) and the nominative case (e.g., *agnih, viṣṇuḥ, savitā*). I generally refer to nouns by their stem form, except for the names of some of the priests, such as *hotā, pratiprasthātā*, etc., because the Nambudiris refer to them in this form.

ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Aitareya Āraṇyaka
AB	Aitareya Brāhmaṇa
AG	(Jaiminiya) Āraṇyageyagāna
ĀpGS	Āpastamba Gṛhya Sūtra
ĀpŚS	Āpastamba Śrauta Sūtra
ĀpŚulvaS	Āpastamba Śulva Sūtra
ĀGS	Āśvalāyana Gṛhya Sūtra
ĀSS	Āśvalāyana Śrauta Sūtra
AV	Atharvaveda Saṃhitā
BĀU	Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad
BGS	Baudhāyana Gṛhya Sūtra
BhārŚS	Bhāradvāja Śrauta Sūtra
BŚS	Baudhāyana Śrauta Sūtra
BŚulvaS	Baudhāyana Śulva Sūtra
CU	Chāndogya Upaniṣad
GG	(Jaiminiya) Grāmageyagāna
GobhGS	Gobhila Gṛhya Sūtra
HirGS	Hiraṇyakeśi Gṛhya Sūtra
HirśS	Hiraṇyakeśi Śrauta Sūtra
JA	Jaiminiya Ārcika
JB	Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa
JŚS	Jaiminiya Śrauta Sūtra
KapS	Kapīṣṭhala Saṃhitā
KŚS	Kātyāyana Śrauta Sūtra
KŚulvaS	Kātyāyana Śulva Sūtra
KB	Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa
KhādGS	Khādīra Gṛhya Sūtra
KS	Kāṭhaka Saṃhitā
KU	Kena Upaniṣad
LŚS	Lāṭyāyana Śrauta Sūtra
MānŚS	Mānava Śrauta Sūtra
MS	Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā
MU	Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad
PārGS	Pāraskara Gṛhya Sūtra
PB	Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa
RV	Ṛgveda Saṃhitā
SV	Sāmaveda Saṃhitā
ŚB	Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa
ŚGS	Śāṅkhāyana Gṛhya Sūtra

ŚSS	Śāṅkhāyana Śrauta Sūtra
TA	Taittirīya Āraṇyaka
TB	Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa
TS	Taittirīya Saṃhitā
TU	Taittirīya Upaniṣad
VaikhŚS	Vaikhānasa Śrauta Sūtra
VaitŚS	Vaitāna Śrauta Sūtra
VārŚS	Vārāha Śrauta Sūtra
VS(K/M)	Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā (Kāṇva/Mādhyandina)
VŚS	Vādhūla Śrauta Sūtra

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I.

MORE THAN THREE thousand years ago, nomads crossed the mountain ranges that separate Central Asia from Iran and the Indian subcontinent. Leaving behind the dry steppes of their ancestral home, they entered the fertile plains of the upper Indus and came in contact with scattered remnants of an earlier civilization. These nomads imported the rudiments of their social and religious system along with their Indo-European language, which developed into Vedic, and later into Sanskrit. They worshipped fire, called *agni*, and adopted the cult of *soma*—a sacred plant, probably a hallucinogen—which grew in the high mountains.

The interaction between these Central-Asian adventurers and earlier inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent gave birth to Vedic civilization, called after the four Vedas: Ṛgveda, Sāmaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda. These Vedas, oral compositions by bards and priests, have been transmitted by word of mouth to the present day. Their guardians, the brahmins of India, are each attached to one of the Vedas by birth. The Vedas depict Vedic religion, in the words of Louis Renou (1953, 29) as “first and foremost a liturgy, and only secondarily a mythological or speculative system.”

The larger Vedic rituals were primarily dedicated to Agni and Soma. Agni was not only a god in his own right, but the divine messenger and intermediary. The offerings, primarily of clarified butter (ghee), were poured into sacrificial fires installed on altars, and Agni transmitted them to the gods. Special libations were made of juice extracted from the stalks of the Soma plant. Remnants of the offerings were consumed by the celebrants. The ceremonies were accompanied by recitations from the Ṛgveda and chants from the Sāmaveda. According to the Ṛgveda itself (7.26.1), pressed juices unaccompanied by sacred hymns have no effect. The celebrations required the execution of multifarious activities, distributed among priests from different Vedas, who officiated on behalf of, and for the benefit of, a ritual patron, the *yajamāna*.

One of the most elaborate of these ceremonies was called Agnicayana, the “piling of Agni,” or, simply, Agni. This ritual originated around 1,000 B.C. During its performance, a large altar in the shape of a bird, dedicated to Agni and itself also called Agni, was piled from more than a thousand bricks. The Agnicayana plays an important part in the Vedic literature after the Ṛgveda, and especially in the Yajurveda. Unlike the Ṛgveda, which remains curiously alien to India (see Renou 1960), the Yajurveda occupies the center of Vedic culture. It constitutes the foundation of the ritual and of the edifice of the Vedic schools. More distant from the Indo-European back-

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ground than the R̥gveda, the Yajurveda exhibits a more Indian flavor, is closer to the beginnings of Hinduism and Buddhism, and preserves features of earlier Indian cultures. In all these respects, the Agnicayana ritual occupies a similar position. Though it incorporates the Indo-European fire cult and the Indo-Iranian cult of Soma, these begin to be overgrown by numerous features not found outside India. These features are not Indo-European or Indo-Iranian, but are recognizably Indian. The Agnicayana shows us India beginning to assert herself.

Though Vedic ritual was confined to an elite, its performances must have been relatively common for about five centuries. This period—which lasted for a shorter time than Manichaeism or Islam, but longer than Protestantism—may be called the age of karman (“ritual activity”). Around 550 B.C. Vedic culture began to decline. Further east and south, new religions and cultures rose to prominence. Though Hinduism and Buddhism are replete with Vedic elements, they belong to another age, the age of *jñāna* (“knowledge”). Hinduism continued to look upon the Vedas as its source, formally transmitted by the brahmins, regarded as eternal revelation, “of nonhuman origin” (*apauruṣeya*) and no longer understood. Buddhism rejected the Vedic heritage, the authority of brahmins, and the supremacy of ritual. In due course it evolved its own hierarchies and ceremonies. Fragments of the original Vedic ritual survive to the present day in the domestic rites of the brahmins, such as marriage ceremonies. Despite attempts to revive them, we hear less and less of the larger Vedic ritual celebrations. In the eleventh century A.D., the logician Udayana could declare that the great Vedic ceremonies were no longer performed (Renou 1960, 21, note 4).

India, however, is a land of miracles. In a distant corner of southwest India, Kerala, far away from the original home of Vedic civilization, a few families among the isolated and orthodox community of Nambudiri brahmins have maintained their Vedic tradition and continue to perform two Vedic rituals: the Agniṣṭoma, which lasts five days, and the Agnicayana or Agni, which lasts twelve days and continues through some of the nights, from which the name Atirātra (“overnight”) derives. We know little of the history of these performances; their continuation was unknown to the outside world. The Nambudiri performances are not artificial or scholarly reconstructions (as have taken place in some other parts of India), nor are they the results of recent revivals. The tradition is authentic and alive. Though this will be apparent from the present work, it can be directly observed in the attitude of the performers. When the Nambudiri ritualists are told that, according to the classical texts, certain rites used to be performed differently in the past, they say, “Interesting.” Not for a moment would they consider changing their own ritual practice in the light of such information. They perform the rituals as they have learned them from their preceptors. It is their tradition.

During the last hundred years, the Agnicayana has been performed

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seventeen times; during the last fifty years, five times. After a gap of almost twenty years, it was celebrated again in 1975. For the first time in history, it was attended by outsiders. On this occasion, the performance was not only witnessed but filmed, photographed, recorded, and extensively documented. The only restriction was that non-Nambudiris could not enter the ritual enclosure, in which most of the ceremonies took place. This 1975 performance of the Agnicayana, which was possibly the last, is the subject matter of the present publication.

2.

The elaborate ritual performances of the Vedic period and the supreme importance attached to them in Vedic civilization demand an explanation or at least an interpretation. In the earliest Vedic literature itself, rituals, along with meters and chants, are depicted as instruments used by gods and demons to fight and conquer each other, and sometimes to create. Even when the aims are not explicit, gods and demons are frequently described as engaged in ritual. It is obvious, however, that priests who perform rites on behalf of a yajamāna cannot always be thought of as conquering or creating. Moreover, the later commentaries, especially the Brāhmaṇas attached to the various Vedic schools, provide rituals with a great variety of interpretations, sometimes inconsistent with each other. Many of these are obvious rationalizations. Some invoke events, myths, or legends that have nothing to do with the rites at hand. On the other hand, the most important episodes of Vedic mythology, those that reflect cosmogonic events, are not reflected or used in any rites (Renou 1953, 16; cf. below page 117). Renou concluded:

We must be content with very general theories if we are to avoid arbitrary explanations such as those put forward in the old *Brāhmaṇas*, where we find fabricated accounts of the origin of various details in the liturgical ceremonial. In these stories there is much that deserves attention, but the *nidāna* or *bandhu*, the hidden connection that they try to establish, cannot be accepted; it is too visibly the product of the priestly mind. It is recognized in the texts that comprehension must cease at a certain point: they declare “*paro’kṣakāmā hi devāḥ*,” “the gods love what is out of sight” (1953, 16; with a modification in the translation).

The recitations that accompany the rites often express specific desires: for health, strength, sons, victory, heaven, and immortality. The list of wishes and desires is not so different from that of modern man. It is not exclusively spiritual, as some contemporary visionaries have claimed, nor is it wholly materialistic, as some critics have asserted. As can be seen at a

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glance from the recitations recorded in this book, the same desires are repeated over and over again. Does this mean that they were never fulfilled? In spite of a certain poetic variation, such repetitiveness would almost seem offensive, not least to the gods. However, it is universally believed, and by the best of minds, that repetition increases effectiveness. Today, similar repetitions are thrust upon us by politicians and the media—not to mention commercials. Bertrand Russell was criticized for his antiwar speeches by a general: "Do you not think there is some lack of a sense of humour in going on reiterating the same thing?" Russell observed that, if it would not serve any purpose to repeat himself, "I failed to see why he was so anxious to prevent me from doing so."

By the time the Vedic rituals had reached their greatest elaboration, these reiterated wishes receded into the background. Their place was taken by a codification of the two kinds of rites we have already met: the *grhya* or domestic rites—which are "rites de passage," life-cycle rites or sacraments, accompanying such events as birth, initiation, marriage, and death—and the *śrauta* rites, which the French call "rites solennels." There are several general and formal differences between these two kinds of ritual. For example, the *śrauta* rites require three fire altars and the services of several priests, whereas the domestic rites require only one fire (the domestic fire) and one priest (the domestic priest). While the function of the domestic rites appears to be fairly straightforward, the significance of the *śrauta* rites is not obvious. The *śrauta* ritual, with its myriad ramifications, exhibits the unhampered development of ritual construction and creativity. It is therefore more important for the understanding of ritual than the domestic rites. There are, moreover, *śrauta* rituals that last a thousand years, which shows that some of the rites were purely theoretical. Such theoretical constructs (which the grammarian Patañjali compared to the infinite uses of language) should not be brushed aside, as was done by Hillebrandt, who referred in this connection to "myth and fantasy" of the ritualists (1897, 158). On the contrary, they are as important for the theory of ritual as are concrete ceremonies. Many rites have, in fact, an intermediate status. The Agnicayana, which was performed in 1975, is a *śrauta* ritual that seems to have been always "real," though some of its extensions, which the texts describe, smack of theory.

The *Śrauta Sūtras* of the late Vedic period offer several definitions of ritual. One that is often quoted characterizes it as comprising three things: *dravya*, "the substance (used in oblations)"; *devatā*, "the deity (to which oblations are offered)"; and *tyāga*, "renunciation (of the fruits of the ritual acts)." The *tyāga* is a formula pronounced by the *yajamāna* or patron at the culmination of each act of oblation. When the officiating priest, on behalf of the *yajamāna*, makes the oblation into the fire for one of the gods, for example Agni, the *Yajamāna* says:

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This is for Agni, not for me (*agnaye idam na mama*).

At this point a contradiction begins to appear, which becomes increasingly explicit in the ritualistic philosophy of the *Mīmāṃsā*. The reason for performing a specific ritual is stated to be the desire for a particular fruit or effect. The stock example of the *Mīmāṃsā* is:

He who desires heaven shall sacrifice with the Agniṣṭoma ritual (*agniṣṭomena svargakāmo yajeta*).

But this fruit is renounced whenever the *yajamāna* utters his *tyāga* formula of renunciation. The effect, therefore, is not obtained.

The resulting picture is further complicated by another apparent contradiction. The rites are subdivided into two classes, "obligatory" (*nitya*) and "optional" (*kāmya*). Unlike the Agnicayana, which is *kāmya*, the Agniṣṭoma is a *nitya* rite: every brahman has the duty to perform it. So here is a ritual that appears to be optional, since it is confined to those who desire heaven (nobody's duty), but that is also not optional because it is a prescribed duty, and that does not bear any fruit because its fruits are ultimately abandoned. The texts reflect such contradictions. The *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra*, basic manual of the ritual philosophy of the *Mīmāṃsā*, lays down that the rites lead to happiness, but the subcommentary "Straight Spotless" (*Rjuvimalā*) observes that this does not apply to obligatory acts.

The *Mīmāṃsā* philosophers faced another difficulty. When a ritual performance is completed, no fruit is seen. The *yajamāna*, on whose behalf the rites have been performed, does not rise up and go to heaven. Rather the opposite: he returns home and is, as the texts put it, the same as he was before. In particular, he must continue to perform the morning and evening fire rites (*Agnihotra*) for the rest of his life. The *Mīmāṃsā* concluded, quite logically, that the fruit of ritual activity is—temporarily—unseen. It will become apparent only later, e.g., after death. An elaborate theory was devised to show that this is in accordance with the mechanism of *karman*, according to which every cause has an effect. A special logical theorem, called *arthāpatti*, was invented in support of this theory. The followers of the *Mīmāṃsā* were criticized by others (e.g., the philosophers of the *Advaita Vedānta*) for postulating such unseen effects. For whatever our contemporary fads may suggest, in India the unseen is resorted to only under duress. What the *Mīmāṃsā* in fact ended up teaching is that the rituals have to be performed for their own sake.

The notion of *tyāga*, "renunciation," has attained an important position in Hinduism through the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Here Śrī Kṛṣṇa advocates, as the highest goal of life, a mode of activity in which acts are performed as usual, but the fruit (*phala*) of action (*karman*) is always renounced (*karma-phala-tyāga*).

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Unlike the Brāhmaṇa literature and the Mīmāṃsā, the Śrauta Sūtras are not concerned with interpretation. They confine themselves to description and address insiders. They were in no sense teaching manuals. Their description is not enumerative, but highly structured, and uses abstract principles of organization. The Śrauta Sūtras exhibit the science of ritual as an intellectual discipline. In doing so they influenced and determined the development of scholarly and scientific methodologies in India. The ritual rules (sūtra) are formulated carefully and consistently, the use of metarules (*paribhāṣā*) enables the authors to explicate structure and avoid redundancy, and the logical organization of the system of rules is brought out explicitly. All these features developed gradually and paved the way for the work of the Sanskrit grammarians. Directly or indirectly, they contributed to many of the more technical features of Indian logic and philosophy, which are often expressed in sūtra form. It is not the complexity of the ritual itself, but the Śrauta Sūtras' explicit, systematic, and exhaustive characterization of that complexity that is the first manifestation of the Indian scientific and scholarly genius.

3.

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of ritual for the civilizations and religions of India, for it is their basic feature. Accordingly, for a Hindu or Jaina, and to some extent for a Buddhist, what he does is more important than what he thinks, believes, or says. Earlier, I referred to the *orthodoxy* of the Nambudiri brahmins. It would have been more appropriate to use the term *orthopraxy* (from Greek *ὀρθός*, "right," *δόξα*, "opinion," and *πράξις*, "action"). Ritual activity is physical activity and is therefore primarily related to the body, unlike thinking or believing, which are mainly connected with the mind. Ritual affiliation is therefore determined by birth, and not by choice or preference. Unlike religious sects, ritual traditions coexist more or less peacefully, they are mutually exclusive, and there is neither desire nor mechanism for conversion. This feature, too, has become a mark of Indian religions.

The study of the Vedic ritual ceremonies was taken up by European Sanskrit scholars in the nineteenth century. In 1805, Colebrooke mentioned several śrauta ceremonies, quoting from the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. He did not mention the Agnicayana by name, but referred to it when mentioning that four books of the text "teach the consecration of sacrificial fire: and the tenth, entitled *Agnirahasya*" (see below page 63) "shows the benefits of these ceremonies" (Colebrooke 1873, 54). The first survey that resulted from these European studies appeared at the end of the century in Hillebrandt's *Ritual-Literatur: Vedische Opfer und Zauber* of 1897.

Around the turn of the century, Willem Caland (1859–1932) opened up

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the study of Vedic ritual in its full depth and complexity. By publishing and translating some of the Śrauta Sūtras (upon which the excerpts from Baudhāyana in our second volume are based) he showed that there was a science of ritual, and explicated for the first time in a Western language the Indian systems of ritual rules. Apart from ritual, he wrote extensively on the arcane subtleties of the Sāmaveda and explained its liturgical *raison d'être*. He left a few questions unanswered. In due course, I obtained their answers from Itti Ravi. The paradigm of the Soma rituals was described by Caland and Henry in the two volumes of their *Agniṣṭoma* of 1906. As we have seen, this is the five-day ritual that the Nambudiris have preserved.

Since the publication of the monumental "Caland and Henry," Western, Indian, and Japanese scholars have explored the ritual texts, and especially the Śrauta Sūtras, in breadth and depth. Hillebrandt dealt with the *Darśa-pūrṇamāsa* (Full- and New-Moon ceremonies), Schwab with the *Paśubandha* (Animal Sacrifice), Dumont with the *Aśvamedha* (Horse Sacrifice) and the Agnihotra (Daily Fire Worship), and Tsuji with the Śrauta Sūtras of the R̥gveda and Yajurveda. Renou published a monograph on the ritual schools. The Vaidika Saṃsodhana Maṇḍala of Poona contributed a series of studies, culminating in a collective work, directed by Dandekar and Kashikar, entitled *Śrautakośa*, an encyclopaedia in several volumes on the śrauta ritual. Renou provided a small dictionary of technical terms used in the ritual, as well as several specialized studies. More recently, the Śrauta Sūtras of the Sāmaveda were studied by Parpola; the *Āśvalāyana* Śrauta Sūtra of the R̥gveda by Mylius; the Baudhāyana, *Bharadvāja*, and *Vārāha* Śrauta Sūtras of the Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda by Kashikar; and particular rites by a host of others, for example, the *Rājasūya* or Royal Consecration by Heesterman, the Pravargya by Van Buitenen, the *Sarvamedha* and the *Samśava* by Mylius, and the *Mahāvratā* by Rolland. More general and interpretative studies have been written by Lévi, Rau, Gonda, Heesterman, Thite, Biarreau, Malamoud, and many others.

Some of the Śulba Sūtras, dealing with the measurement and construction of Vedic altars by means of a cord or rope (*śulba*)—formerly explored by Thibaut, the historian of mathematics Cantor, Van Gelder, and Raghu Vira—have been studied recently by Satya Prakash, Swarup Sharma, and Seidenberg, and have been published by the Research Institute of Ancient Scientific Texts of New Delhi. Numerous links of the śrauta ritual with history, archaeology, art, architecture, music, religion, anthropology, economics, linguistics, literature, mathematics, science, mythology, magic, and philosophy are only beginning to be explored. Gonda's study on the origins of the Indian drama in the Vedic ritual and Kashikar's study on Vedic pottery are examples of what can be done. A new area of research involving botany and pharmacology is opened up by the works of Wasson and Flattery on the hallucinogenic origins of the Soma.

Insofar as information on the ritual is concerned, all such studies are

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confined to texts. Yet, as Renou observed, "one cannot grasp even the outward meaning from reading the text by itself unless one is gifted with the rare virtuosity of a Caland" (1953, 34). Direct information on living ritual in contemporary India is mostly confined to temple ritual, the domestic ritual of the higher castes, other caste rites, village rites, and tribal rituals. Traces of the Rājasūya are preserved in Southeast Asia and in Nepal, and in India in temple worship and *pūjā*, which retain elements of the consecration rite (*dikṣā*).

Until recently it was quite unknown that the śrauta rituals, which are much more spectacular than any of these other rites, continue to be performed in India, albeit rarely and in a few inaccessible places. The fact that these almost three-thousand-year-old rituals are still alive would have astonished Hillebrandt or Caland. Once these survivals were discovered, it became obvious that many of the basic issues concerning the interpretation of the ritual, as well as numerous problems of a more technical nature, could only be brought closer to a solution if the living traditions were studied. At the same time it became clear that this study is a matter of urgency, since many of the few surviving authentic traditions are on the verge of extinction. What ensued was a new era of Vedic research, which involves close collaboration with the traditional Indian ritualists, and which might be more properly called Vedic fieldwork (an expression first used by Kashikar in his Presidential Address to the Vedic section of the 24th All-India Oriental Conference, Varanasi 1968). An unexpected feature of this work is that the informed interest of scholars from all over the world gives fresh hope and inspiration to the rare Vaidikas who try to keep the śrauta traditions alive. A chapter in our second volume (Part III, pages 193–251) will show how extensive these Vedic survivals are.

Scholars who came in contact with the living tradition directed their attention first to the recitations of the Veda, which are not only prominent features of the ritual, but which are more easily accessible because they can be heard outside the ritual context. Nonbrahmins are not allowed to hear Vedic recitation or to attend Vedic rituals. This continues to make Vedic fieldwork a delicate affair. Not surprisingly, the first barrier was overcome first. Recordings were made and studied by Bake, Gray, Howard, Parpola, Raghavan, Sreekrishna Sarma, Van Buitenen, and myself. The Government of India, through its Sanskrit Commission, urged that complete recordings of the Vedas be made. All-India Radio also took an active interest. Subsequently, films of śrauta ceremonies were made by Van Buitenen (of the *Vājapeya*) and by me (of fragments of an *Atyagniṣṭoma*). When the ritual began to be studied also in its social context, it became apparent that much work was left undone by anthropologists. Except for recent work by Mencher, basic information on the Nambudiris, one of the main communities that maintains its Vedic culture, remains available mainly in the older manuals

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of ethnographers (e.g., Anantha Krishna Iyer), historians (e.g., Padmanabha Menon), and British District Collectors (e.g., Logan and Innes).

If nothing else, the present publication will show that a great deal of Vedic fieldwork remains to be done and should be done before it is too late. At this point in history, each time one of the older Vedic ritualists dies, a portion of the 3,000-year-old tradition is irretrievably lost.

4.

Vedic ritual is not only likely to be the oldest surviving ritual of mankind, it also provides the best source material for a theory of ritual. This is not because it is close to any alleged "original" ritual. Vedic ritual is not primitive and is not an *Ur*-ritual. It is sophisticated and already the product of a long development. But it is the largest, most elaborate, and (on account of the Sanskrit manuals) best documented among the rituals of man.

We now have to record one of the more striking failures of modern scholarship, especially striking since it has largely gone unnoticed. Vedic ritual, the best source material for a theory of ritual, has been ignored, with one exception to which I shall return, by precisely those scholars who have been concerned with the theory of ritual. The resulting picture is not edifying: on the one hand we have a highly developed science of ritual, laid down in Sanskrit texts and made accessible and interpreted to non-Sanskritists by several generations of Sanskrit scholars; on the other hand we have ideas on the nature of ritual by anthropologists, psychologists, and students of religion, which fail to take the former into account and are, by comparison, surprisingly simplistic and naïve.

There are several reasons for this state of affairs. First of all, the theorists of ritual have usually confined themselves to generalities. There is no large body of empirical ethnographic work on ritual that theorists can draw upon. Accordingly, theorists tend to quote ritual facts selectively in support of some theory or other. Since details are rarely described exhaustively, the real intricacies are not generally touched upon. In all the work on ritual by anthropologists, ethnographers, and students of religion I am familiar with, there is nothing that approaches the thoroughness of the Indian Śrauta Sūtras. The situation is very different from that in most of the sciences. In biology it is known how many teeth every animal has, and in philology what the numerals of every language are. Only masses of detailed knowledge of this kind can pave the way for adequate theories, which tend to spring up in an imaginative mind steeped in facts. The Indian science of ritual could develop into a rigorous intellectual discipline, on a par with mathematics, physics, or linguistics, because it was based on vast amounts of precise empirical knowledge of ritual and rituals.

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The absence of a Western counterpart to the Indian science of ritual is not due to the fact that rituals are not important. A striking fact about ritual activity is that all men, and probably many other animals as well, engage in it. Perhaps the absence of a science of ritual is due to the fact that the discipline of ritual lacks the utilitarian and pragmatic value that other sciences are believed to have. A physicist can always claim that his work may have military significance, a linguist can always hope that his research is relevant to the computer industry, but a ritualist has no illusions of this kind. It is conceivable that the emphasis on relevance (which means that scholars should follow the whims of others rather than their own) has prevented people from taking ritual seriously and from paying adequate attention to its rich detail and real intricacies.

A specific reason for the neglect of the study of Vedic ritual is that the exclusiveness of its brahmin guardians has been adopted by some of the Sanskritists whose task it is to expound and clarify it. As a result, some publications on Vedic ritual are unintelligible to readers without Sanskrit. This does not apply to some of Caland's work. His translation of Āpastamba's Śrauta Sūtra, for example, appeared in three volumes, the first of which was published in the *Quellen der Religionsgeschichte*, a sourcebook accessible to all students of religion. In order to read the present book no knowledge of Sanskrit is needed, though it does not follow that its contents are simple and easily assimilated.

This is not the place to try to demonstrate fully the inadequacy of the Western approaches to the study of ritual. However, I shall provide a few examples and establish their inadequacy by showing that they fail to apply to Vedic ritual. First let us dispose of the emptiest of all these theories, if it is a theory at all: the idea that ritual effects a transition from the realm of the profane to that of the sacred. (Instead of "transition" we also meet with "communication," a weaker version of the theory.) Though this idea may correspond to some believers' sentiments, it is very unclear. Terms such as "transition" or "communication" are vague and do not pose too much of a problem, but "sacred" and "profane" certainly do. On one interpretation the theory may be saved by turning it into a tautology: the distinction between profane and sacred is the distinction between the status of a person or object before and after a relevant ritual is embarked upon. Accordingly, if sacred and profane have been defined in terms of ritual, ritual cannot be defined in terms of sacred and profane. This is circular and uninformative.

Given another interpretation, this theory would assume that the distinction between sacred and profane is already established and known from elsewhere. For example, "sacred" might have been shown to apply to the domain of the gods, and "profane" to that of men. However, a satisfactory distinction of this kind is not easily found. Moreover, if it were found, the terms would not introduce anything new. The theory would merely claim that ritual effects a transition from the realm of men to that of the gods (or

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a communication between the two). As a matter of fact, the Vedic ritual offers an immediate contraction. During the *Agnipranayana* rite (Episode 20 of Part II), a transition is effected from the Old to the New Altar. The former is said to be the abode of men, and the latter that of the gods. Thus a transition from the domain of men to that of the gods is effected *within* the ritual. The distinction therefore cannot serve as a concept in terms of which ritual itself may be defined.

Another theory that has long been fashionable is that rites reenact myths. This idea, which originated more than a century ago, was partly inspired by the Babylonian festival of the New Year, which involves a recital of the myth of creation. But whether or not it is applicable elsewhere, it is certainly inconsistent with Vedic ritual. As we have already seen, the Vedic rites are, in general, not related to any myths. In the few cases where there is a historical connection, it has no longer a ritual function. The officiating ritualists may not be aware of it, just as speakers of a language need not know the etymology of a word, which is no longer connected with the word's meaning or function. Just as etymology is not linguistics, the notion that rites reenact myths has nothing to contribute to the science of ritual. Moreover, in the few cases where historians can trace a mythological connection, the rites lead a life of their own, full of ritual features that have nothing to do with, and are not explicable in terms of mythology. An example is the construction of the fire altar from a thousand bricks. This is probably related to a hymn in the R̥gveda that refers to a Man with a thousand heads, eyes, and feet (see below page 113). Though the precise relationship is not clear, the mythological background seems to be safeguarded in this case. However, this background has no ritual significance. What is ritually relevant is that numerous rules are followed that determine the shape of the bricks, their arrangement, the order in which they are piled, and the various mantras with which they are consecrated. Many additional rules pertain to specific features relating to the placement of the bricks, the activities and behavior of the priests in relation to them, the recitations over the completed layers, over the completed altar, and so forth. These are the bread and butter of ritual activity, the activities determined by tradition and/or texts, the knowledge of which distinguishes a ritualist from an outsider. Moreover, none of this enormous amount of ritual has any mythological background or significance. The idea that rites reenact myths may be applicable to Vedic ritual in a few isolated cases and, in those cases, in a very general way, but it fails to explicate any specific rite. It fails, therefore, even as a component of a general theory of ritual.

The same holds for the related theory, current among anthropologists, that rituals are used to transmit cultural and social values to the younger generation. Whether or not this theory holds elsewhere, there is no evidence in support of it from the area of Vedic ritual. It is tautologically true that rituals transmit ritual values, whatever these are, but it is difficult to pinpoint other values that Vedic rites such as are described in this book transmit in

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general. It is obvious that ritual performances create a bond between the participants, reinforce solidarity and territory, boost morale, and constitute a link with the ancestors. So do many other institutions and customs. Such side effects cannot be used to explain ritual. It is true that a few rites are specifically dedicated to the ancestors, but this does not explain the great majority of rites, and throws no light on the nature of ritual in general.

The idea that rites and myths are closely connected is a typically Western idea. It is connected with the notion of "orthodoxy," which stresses the importance of opinions and ideas. To the Indian ritualist it is the activity that counts. As a mode of existence it is perfect in itself and does not stand in need of something else. Unfortunately, anthropological studies have mainly developed against a Western background, and continue to be dominated by the search for a connection between rites and myths. Even Lévi-Strauss, who has many worthwhile things to say on ritual in general, offers, as a kind of definition, that ritual "consists of utterances, gestures and manipulations of objects which are independent of the interpretations which are proper to these modes of activity and which result not from the ritual itself but from implicit mythology" (1971, 600). Vedic ritual does not support the last clause. However, the distinction between ritual and proper activities is certainly applicable to it. Almost any rite could illustrate this. Consider the important ceremony, already referred to, of Agnipraṇayana, "transporting the fire." Agni is transported from the Old to the New Altar. First the adhvaryu priest of the Yajurveda addresses some of the other priests with a formula, prompting them to perform their respective ritual tasks. Then he lifts the clay pot containing the fire, and begins to move east, addressing recitations to Agni and other gods. Several priests form a procession, each executing his own rites and recitations (see Part II, Episode 20).

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To the onlooker, the main result of this performance seems to be that the fire is deposited on the New Altar. This result, however, can only be reached in the ritually prescribed manner and has only ritual use. If it were an ordinary activity, I could come in from the outside and assist in the proceedings by picking up the fire from the Old Altar and depositing it on the New Altar, or by making a wheelbarrow available. However, if I did such things, the ceremony would be desecrated, interrupted, and expiation rites would have to be performed. Similar disruption would result if anyone used the sacred fire for any but a ritual purpose, e.g., to heat water for tea.

The two kinds of activity, ritual and ordinary, can be juxtaposed without conflict or contradiction. After making fire in the ritually prescribed manner, by rubbing two pieces of wood together, a priest may leave the sacred enclosure and light a cigarette with a match. But the two domains should not be mixed. If a priest were to light a cigarette from the sacred fire, it would be bad; he would have confounded different realms and roles. If, on the other hand, he were to go outside the enclosure, produce fire by rubbing two

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pieces of wood together, and light his cigarette from that fire, he would be considered mad or at least eccentric. This would not, incidentally, disqualify him from performing ritual tasks. The ritual and ordinary ways of making fire are neatly demarcated.

The so-called structuralist approach, often associated with the work of Lévi-Strauss, may well be applicable to the study of Vedic ritual, but it would have to be formulated more adequately. Since it is by definition a synchronistic approach, remnants of diachronistic methods of explanation (e.g., "rites derive from myths") would first of all have to be excised from it.

A more unadulterated form of structuralism occurs in the work of the earlier anthropologist Van Gennep. Van Gennep coined the expression "rites de passage," the title of his book of 1909, which is largely applicable to the Vedic domestic (grhya) rites but does not contribute to the understanding of the śrauta rites. After completing his book, Van Gennep noted that in many societies marriage ceremonies include an aspersion rite that he interpreted as a fecundity rite. Identical aspersion rites are employed, in the same and in different societies, when a slave is acquired, when a new ambassador arrives in town, to make rain, or to expel someone. Van Gennep gave different interpretations to each of these rites, and concluded:

The aspersion rite does not have any personal or basic meaning in the state of isolation, but it is meaningful if seen as a component part of a particular ceremony. The meaning of the rite can, consequently, only be found by determining the relation it has with the other elements of the whole ceremony (Van Gennep 1911, in Waardenburg 1973, I, 299).

This seems a promising kind of structural approach, and though it is sketchy, there is nothing in the Vedic ritual that contradicts it. I am not familiar with any attempt to develop this approach systematically and in detail, so that the data of the present book, for example, could be used to test it. This is in general the complaint one is forced to make about these anthropological contributions, not to mention the religious ones, which are very much vaguer: if they mention Vedic ritual at all, they are no more precise, and much less enjoyable, than Foster's *Hill of Devi* (1953, 36): "As each guest finished, he sang a little song from the Vedas in praise of some god, and the Rajah was, as usual, charming."

Earlier I mentioned that there is one exception to the general neglect of Vedic ritual by theorists of ritual. This exception is contained in the work of Hubert and Mauss, who used the Vedic animal sacrifice as source material for the construction of a ritual paradigm (*un schème abstrait du sacrifice*, 1909, 22). Their study is thorough and admirable, though it stays rather close to the texts made accessible mainly by Schwab. Hubert and Mauss did not know that these rituals are still performed, so that some of the data were

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inaccessible to them. When it comes to structure, the authors noted little more than that rites have a beginning, a middle, and an end. More can be done (see Part III, Chapter 00). At least their own essay was a real beginning, though nothing of similar quality seems to have followed.

In the area of psychology, the only worthwhile contribution I am familiar with is the brief article Freud devoted to the subject. Freud noted three points of similarity between rites and neurotic obsessions: "the fear of pangs of conscience after their omission," their "complete isolation from all other activities," and "the conscientiousness with which the details are carried out." He also enumerated three differences:

the greater individual variability of neurotic ceremonial in contrast with the stereotyped character of rites (prayer, orientation, etc.); its private nature as opposed to the public and communal character of religious observances; especially, however, the distinction that the little details of religious ceremonies are full of meaning and are understood symbolically, while those of neurotics seem silly and meaningless (Freud 1907, in 1953, II, 27-28).

While the similarities discovered by Freud seem to be real, the differences are not. The first difference is overstated: Freud was more familiar with the variability of obsessive acts than of rites. The present book will easily redress the balance. The second difference does not obtain: many Hindu and Buddhist rites are performed by a single priest, an audience being optional. This holds for temple and iconic ritual, and especially for Tantric rites, which combine ritual with meditation and Yogic practice, in India, Indonesia, and the Far East (cf. Staal 1975, 191-193; Hooykaas, in Part III, pages 382-402). As for the other side of the alleged difference, I am not qualified to challenge the view that neurotic obsessive behavior is only private. I doubt Freud would have been as emphatic had he lived in California.

Regarding the third difference, the thrust of Freud's article is that obsessive acts are meaningful, and therefore similar to religious rites. His paper does not show that obsessive acts have general meaning, but illustrates how they refer to particular events, "from the most intimate, and for the most part from the sexual experiences of the patient." Here Vedic ritual could offer at least some support. For example, the birth of Agni from the kindling blocks that are rubbed together is clearly connected with the sexual act (see below page 76). Sex, however, predates Freud. Beyond throwing light on a few particular rites and, perhaps, ritualists, I do not see how Freudian theories could explain ritual activity in general.

Obsessiveness in ritual is often reported, though it does not seem to be a necessary feature. Moreover, it may merely reside in the eyes of the beholder who is unfamiliar with particular ritual procedures. Speakers of a language also adhere painstakingly to numerous rules when they utter a

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sentence. This does not seem obsessive even to a person who does not know the language, though it might seem so to a being who does not know any language. Lévi-Strauss has been criticized for neglecting this obsessiveness or anxiety that may accompany or underlie ritual. Instead of replying to his critics that the anxiety is theirs, Lévi-Strauss has located it in the ritualists' fear that reality, which they cut up, cannot be put together again (1971, 603, 608). However, the ritual of the fire altar contradicts this assumption. It involves the construction of a large altar that allegedly puts together the universe, the god Prajāpati, or the yajamāna. Since the participants need not be familiar with these mythological notions, we should confine ourselves to saying that the altar is put together. If we admit mythology, as Lévi-Strauss does, it weakens his case further. However, it is irrelevant, as these notions are probably a later rationalization. (In the Soma rituals, Prajāpati is certainly an afterthought: Oldenberg 1919, 31; see below page 160). It is an undeniable fact that the altar is put together without anxiety.

To the extent that there is obsessiveness in ritual performance, its explanation does not seem to pose much of a problem. An activity that has to be performed painstakingly and in accordance with strict rules can easily become obsessive. Ritualists may be obsessed by rites, stockbrokers by the market, or mathematicians by proofs. I have been obsessed by the Agnicayana, at least to some extent, or else I would not have completed this book. There is scope for obsession wherever there is serious concern. The more complex the domain, the greater the concern that mistakes have been made. The Agnicayana performance of 1975 was followed by a long series of expiation rites for mistakes that were or might have been committed. No anxiety or discomfort was felt, however, unless it was due to the excessive heat. Like solidarity, obsessiveness may be a side effect of ritual. It is not a necessary feature.

Biologists have used the term "ritualization" with reference to certain types of animal behavior (e.g., Huxley 1966). Some anthropologists have denied that there is any connection between such ritualization and human rituals. As far as I can see the question is wide open. I hope biologists will use the detailed descriptions offered in this book to determine whether there is any resemblance to animal ritualization.

5.

In the previous section I have claimed that theorists of ritual have neglected Vedic ritual. Though true, this might merely be an oversight, easily accommodated. What we have seen, however, is worse. All the theories mentioned fail to be applicable to Vedic ritual and are therefore basically inadequate. Moreover, their inadequacies cannot be resolved by patchwork. At this point the reader may voice a suspicion. Perhaps Vedic ritual con-

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stitutes an exception. Perhaps Vedic ritual is too sophisticated, highly developed, and intellectual. This may be so—I could not tell without undertaking a major comparative survey of rituals. However, I suspect that such criticism is on a par with saying that it does not matter that a certain theory of language does not apply to Sanskrit or English, because Sanskrit or English are too sophisticated, highly developed, and intellectual. If anyone were to make such a claim, the conclusion would be simple and immediate: his theory of language is itself insufficiently sophisticated, developed, and intellectual. The same verdict must apply to the theories of ritual we have reviewed. If they cannot account for Vedic ritual, they must go.

There is a general reason for this inadequacy: all these theories are of the reductionist kind. They attempt to reduce ritual to something else. Vedic ritual shows that ritual is, at least in part, a discipline engaged in for its own sake, which cannot therefore be thus reduced. Most Indian theorists of ritual have sensed this, and some have stated it in so many words. Basically, the irreducibility of ritual shows that action constitutes a category in its own right. To reduce it to ideas or anything else seems the scholar's prerogative, but in this case it appears doomed. It is likely, at this stage, that no general theory of the reductionist kind can explain the majority of Vedic rites such as are treated in this book.¹ This is especially clear in the case of such elaborate ceremonies as I referred to in connection with the piling of the bricks. These specific rites cannot be explained by a general desire for strength or heaven, a yearning for the sacred, a wish to reenact myths, sexual anxiety, or any such motivation, which—from the ritual point of view—can only be regarded as extraneous. Such rites show, on the contrary, that ritual follows its own principles and leads a life of its own. Once this is realized, it becomes increasingly obvious. When the bricks of the altar have been finally deposited and consecrated (which takes five days: one day for each layer) there is an unexpected sequel: 118 pebbles are placed on the top layer, in specific positions between the bricks. Again each pebble is consecrated with mantras. And so it goes on, rite after rite. Ritual exhibits a very detailed and specific knowledge. I estimate that the extent of specialized knowledge needed to put the altar together ritually is on a par with the extent of technical knowledge required to build an aeroplane. The bird-shaped altar is in fact a kind of aeroplane, only it takes off in a different way.

The Soma ceremonies require similarly complex constructions, though the intricacies are different in kind. Here numerous subtle relationships are maintained between recitations of the Ṛgveda and chants of the Sāmaveda. They are carefully balanced, and each is subject to numerous rules; syllables, groups of syllables and verses are repeated, partially repeated, or undergo

¹ I say "at this stage" because it is not inconceivable that a future science of ritual, which would account for all such specific rites, would itself turn out to be reducible to another science, as chemistry is to physics. But we are far from having reached such a stage of advancement in our understanding of ritual.

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transpositions; certain parts are hidden; specific priests officiate in specific roles. When dealing with some of the intricacies of these chants, even Caland lost heart: *Au surplus, cette méthode de chant comporte encore une infinité de règles, qu'il est impossible de consigner ici* (Caland and Henry, 180, note). The Soma sequences exhibit mind-boggling complexities that relate almost entirely to the form of the chants and recitations, and can therefore be described in purely formal terms. In order to achieve this, the priests cooperate closely, and the results resemble the movements of a musical composition of Wagnerian proportions.

Some of these complexities, and much of the ritual tendency toward proliferation, are due to recursive features. These are features that result from rules that are applicable to their own output. A simple example is the rule:

$$B \rightarrow A B A$$

This rule expresses the fact that a structure B is joined on both sides by another structure, A. Since the rule applies to any B, it applies to the B of its output:

$$A B A \rightarrow A (A B A) A \text{ or } A A B A A$$

By reiterating this procedure, an indefinite number of structures A may be attached to B on both sides:

$$\dots A A A B A A A \dots$$

The recursive features of Vedic ritual include this structure, and many more complex structures (for illustrations, see pages 127–134 of Part III in the second volume). Such features will have to be taken into account in any general theory of ritual structure. They are indicated, and sometimes explicated, in the Śrauta Sūtras.

A simple application of a recursive structure is the insertion of the so-called *iṣṭi* rite (basically a vegetable oblation: see pages 46–47). *Iṣṭi* rites can be inserted in specific, but indefinitely many places, so that the ritual system is indefinitely expandable. Such recursive features are not confined to Vedic ritual. They occur in the elaborate rituals that characterize contemporary bureaucracies. An *iṣṭi* rite is in certain respects like a committee or a report. Committees create new committees and reports lead to more reports. At the University of California we have a Committee on Committees, which symbolizes and initiates such recursiveness, which then operates throughout the system. I once argued that a certain committee should be abandoned because it served no purpose. My arguments were taken seriously and time was spent on debating whether a subcommittee should be created to look into them and submit a report. As we have already learned from our cursory survey of the interpretations of Vedic ritual, invisibility of results is no bar to the proliferation of rites. Rites obey principles of their own, and humans find

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rationalizations to explain them. Such rationalizations are also invoked to explain the proliferation of committees and reports: supporters claim that they safeguard justice and fairness; critics attribute them to suspicion and paranoia; the truth is that ritual forces are at work, which are greater than man.

One reason that the absence of visible or otherwise detectable results causes no concern is that large rituals are ends in themselves. A bureaucracy grows and does not mind a diminution of its effectiveness and an increase in waste provided that its rules and regulations are maintained and further developed. Vedic ritual manifests the same tendency to be absorbed in itself. The rites have no practical utility and have lost their original function, if ever they had one. The ritualists perform them not in order to obtain certain ends, but because it is their task. Lack of practical utility, incidentally, is a characteristic that ritual shares with many of the higher forms of human civilization. It may be a mark of civilization.

There is an analogy between rites which are without function, and ritual language which is without meaning. We have already observed that an important characteristic of Vedic ritual is the emphasis on recitation and chant. Under duress, ritual acts may be neglected, glossed over, or changed, but recitations must be maintained at all cost, and without modification. This has been the case in the past, and continues to be so in the present. The construction of the fire altar involves the deposition of more than a thousand bricks, of specific sizes and shapes, and in a complicated pattern. However, the physical deposition of the bricks is unimportant; what counts is their consecration by mantras. This is obvious from the simple fact that, though the order of bricks is ritually prescribed, the bricks are actually put down in any order, and not at the proper time. When they are consecrated, however, the prescribed order is adhered to and the correct time is observed. This emphasis on ritual consecration also explains the pebbles, mentioned before: they must have been introduced simply because there were more mantras than bricks. That this emphasis on mantras has been the same for at least 2500 years is demonstrated by a statement in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (9.1.2.17): "This fire altar is language, for it is constructed with language."

During the 1975 performance of the ceremony several changes were made. One of the most important was that no animals were killed during the fourteen animal sacrifices traditionally prescribed. The goats were represented by cakes made of a paste of rice flour. This modification did affect the rites, since it is not easy to kill rice cakes by strangulation and cut them open to take out particular internal organs. However, the mantras were recited in the prescribed manner and it was felt that the essence of the ritual was thereby preserved.

If it is remarkable that recitations are more important than acts, it is not less remarkable that these recitations are not generally understood. This unintelligibility is an inherent feature of mantras. It is not simply due

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to the meaning having been forgotten. Whoever can remember a mantra can certainly remember its meaning. However, mantras are significant not as meaningful expressions, but as units recited on specific ritual occasions. In its purest form, this view was defended by the ancient ritualist Kautsa, according to whom the mantras are meaningless (see below, page 61). This is consistent with the fact that the formal features of the recitations and chants are ritually the most important. Hence the emphasis on syllables, meters, insertions, and transpositions, none of which make any sense in terms of meaning. An extreme example is provided by the Sixteenth Recitation (Śoḍaśi-śāstra), which is also one of the most sacred and mysterious (Part II, Episode 29, pages 660-663).

In the history of the religions of India we increasingly meet with mantras that are unintelligible and mysterious, not because they have lost their original meaning, but because they had no meaning to begin with. A well-known example is the mantra OM, which originated in the Vedic recitations. Though an entire Upaniṣad is devoted to its interpretation, the interpretation is pure rationalization. Unlike language, such mantras are universal. They do not stand in need of translation. The abundance of such sacred noises in Buddhism facilitated its introduction into China, where their way was paved by the magical formulas of Taoism (cf. Staal 1979a).

In the case of the Sāmaveda chants, their meaninglessness is more obvious and admits of a simple explanation in historical terms. Basically the Sāmaveda consists of mantras, mostly taken from the Ṛgveda and set to music. The texts are adapted to the melodies, so that many words are changed and new syllables are inserted. Thus we meet in the chants with sequences such as: *hā yi* or *kā hvā hvā hvā hvā hvā hvā*. Meaningful words may also be incorporated, e.g., *suvar jyotiḥ*. This expression has a meaning by itself ("celestial light") but not in its melodic or ritual setting. The chants of the Sāmaveda are often *Lieder ohne Worte*, "Songs without Words," as is indicated by their name, *sāman*, which means "melody" as well as "the hum of bees." Faddegon referred in this connection, quite appropriately, to "Ritualistic Dadaism" (1927), showing thereby—as did Wasson and Flattery—that the fashions of one period sometimes enable us to understand another.

In Vedic ritual the chants and recitations that accompany the acts are partly meaningless. This meaninglessness may be original or derived. A similar situation obtains with respect to the rites themselves. They are often devoid of function or outside reference, which again may be original or derived. A few illustrations will make this clear, and will show that this state of affairs is not confined to Vedic ritual.

Some of the earliest rituals of mankind seem to have originated in connection with the use of fire. As we shall see (Part I, page 78), carrying fire became a ritual activity as soon as it was no longer necessary, i.e., as soon as man had discovered methods for kindling fire. The two main types of ritual fire, "perpetual fire" and "new fire," represent the two main periods

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in the history of fire, the early age of fire collecting and the later age of fire production. During the ceremonies that will be described in this book, there are seven occasions at which new fire was made by rubbing two pieces of wood together. At all other times the fires were kept. The making of new fire is not accompanied by mantras and is therefore less ritualized than the carrying of perpetual fire, which is generally accompanied by mantras and other rites. The historical explanation is that the transportation of fire is much older, and became superfluous much longer ago.

While many rites that pertain to fire go back to the early stages of human evolution, other Vedic rites reflect later and historical periods. Many rites are inspired by the adventures of Vedic nomads who entered the Indian subcontinent from the northwest (Part I, Chapter 5, p. 90). The sacred fire (going back to the Indo-European period) and the sacred Soma plant (going back to the Indo-Iranian period) are ritually transported from west to east, as they were carried by the Vedic nomads in the course of their eastward expansion. The priests recite battle hymns that make sense only in the context of these early adventures. The rites refer to enemies who are sometimes historical, at other times purely ritual. The modern performers are not aware of any of these historical roots, which are not reenacted or celebrated and are as unimportant to the ritual as the etymology of a word is to its meaning.

The cult of Soma, originally a hallucinogenic plant, has undergone the most massive ritualization. This is apparently connected with the fact that the original Soma was lost and replaced by substitutes at an early period (Part I, page 109). This is similar to the disappearance of features of the paleolithic hunt, which seem to survive only in ritual sacrifice. In this connection Burkert has sounded a warning: scholars are prone to assert that the original idea behind a ritual has been lost or misunderstood (1979, 38). In some cases it is likely that there never was an idea behind it. Even if there was, it is no longer functional in ritual performances, and is therefore without ritual significance.

The tendencies of rites to be without function and of ritual language to be without meaning are conspicuous in the area of Vedic ritual. This is not the place to enquire to what extent these are general characteristics of all ritual. If they are, this would offer a simple explanation for the inadequacies of the Western theories of ritual we have reviewed, for all theorists of ritual have assumed that ritual cannot merely have intrinsic value, but must be provided with meaning, function, or outside reference. If the assumption is wrong, this would indicate that theorists are in this respect not different from ordinary believers, who always assume that rites have special, if not extraordinary effects.

When Vedic ritual entered the counterculture in the United States, a center was set up in Randallstown, Maryland. It distributes a journal, pamphlets, and books that claim that ashes from the Agnihotra fire may cure fever, skin fungus, and ringworm, and alleviate cancer of the rectum. A

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pharmaceutical firm in Bodensee, Switzerland is quoted as confirming these findings. Apparently, such specific cures are expected by Westerners, too sophisticated to be satisfied with health, strength, and immortality in general.¹ However, if we are able and willing to abandon our own specific expectations and desires and to immerse ourselves in the rites as they are performed, we realize that Vedic ritual is very different from a health cure, a psychoanalytic session, an anthropological meeting, or a religious service. When we begin to develop a sense for its structure and orchestration, we discern that the ritual resembles, at least structurally, a musical performance. As a matter of fact, some of the syntactic rules that ritual and language share are also found in music. The structures ABA, ABBA, ABCBA, and AABAA, for example, all occur in Bach's six sonatas for violin and harpsichord. Why men and probably some other animals use and delight in such structures and not in others, equally plausible or implausible, has not yet been explained.

6.

Words are not the most effective means for describing activities, ritual or ordinary. How simple it is to peel an apple, yet how cumbersome to describe that process in words, especially to someone who has never seen an apple or used a knife. With respect to rites, the task of their description was undertaken in the Śrauta Sūtras. It is also the principal aim of Part II of this book. In formulating the descriptions, I have experienced some of the problems with which Baudhāyana and other authors of Śrauta Sūtras were struggling more than 2,000 years ago. In the course of my work my admiration for them has grown. However, there is a difference between those manuals and the present publication. The Śrauta Sūtras, though fully explicit, address an audience of initiates and connoisseurs. The authors made judicious use of references, cross references, and abbreviations, all explained with the help of metarules (*paribhāṣā*). For example, in the Śrauta Sūtras of the Yajurveda, "he" always refers to the *adhvaryu* priest. Whenever an oblation is referred to, and is not otherwise specified, it is to be understood that it is an oblation of ghee, made by the *adhvaryu* into the sacrificial fire by means of the *juhū* ladle or by means of the *sruva* if the *juhū* is already otherwise employed. Vedic recitations, nowadays generally referred to by numbers, are quoted by the beginning words, the end being marked by the particle *iti*.

¹ Actually the Agnihotra center at Randallstown is not the first manifestation of Vedic ritual in American popular culture. The priority goes to Batman, as Michael O'Flaherty has shown. In the January, 1976, issue of the *Batman* journal, the hero is shown a slide of a mysterious rug and exclaims: "Just as I thought—the figure of *Agni*, the *Vedic god of the altar fire*! This is a *prayer rug* of an obscure sect of the *Vedas* . . . a most sacred object . . . In fact, even *photographing* it is considered *desecration*!"

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The resulting prose is characterized by a highly nominalized, formulaic style, which—in some of the later texts—begins to resemble algebra.

By contrast, the present volume addresses an audience not merely of experts, be they Sanskritists, Indologists, or even Vedic ritualists. Throughout my work I have tried to keep in mind that my readers would be historians, anthropologists, psychologists, students of religion—in fact anyone interested in the great manifestations of civilization, provided he has the *Sitzfleisch* and reads from the beginning. Since the subject is explained ab ovo, the description is even longer than the relevant parts of the Śrauta Sūtras, composed for insiders, which are published and translated in the second volume. And yet, in spite of its intrinsic value, I would have hesitated to present a work so large and so exotic were it not for its audiovisual component. In fact, this component is better suited to its subject matter than the 250,000 words of the entire text. The photographs of the rites form an integral part of the book. The same holds with regard to the cassette tapes, which give an idea of the power of the oral tradition. I have found that Western traditions and sensibilities are such that most Westerners are attracted by the pictures but mystified by the recordings. It is good to plunge oneself into both before one undertakes any systematic reading. Ideally, readers should first see the film “Altar of Fire,” which it has not been feasible to include in this package. This provides an immediate experience of some of the ceremonies, and after 45 minutes one has reached just that mixture of understanding and bewilderment that propels one to take on the book.

The organization of the book is straightforward. This first volume consists of two parts and a Bibliography. Part I provides the background. It deals with Vedic ritual in general, its sources and traditional interpretations, the historical and prehistorical background, and the community of the performers. As I have already indicated, much of this background, though interesting for the understanding of Indian culture and for a variety of other reasons, need not possess any ritual significance.

Part II of the first volume, its main part, offers a detailed description of the 1975 performance of the ritual. It is preceded by a description of the preparations that discusses time, space, materials, and personnel. The principles of the description, which is selective and nonbehavioristic, are explained in an Introductory Note (pages 274–276). The description is concerned with the 1975 performance, not with what is prescribed in the classical texts.

The second volume consists of three parts, numbered III–V. Part III is a collection of contributions by different scholars whose work illuminates the ritual from a variety of perspectives. Some of these authors attended the 1975 performance. Part IV contains texts and translations of the relevant ritual manuals. The first of these, Chapter 10 of the Baudhāyana Śrauta Sūtra, provides a detailed description of the Agnicayana ritual and should be compared with the description of Part II by anyone who wishes to study the difference between the classical tradition and the 1975 perfor-

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mance. Part V gives a brief outline of the twenty hours of film and eighty hours of recordings made in 1975 under the direction of Robert Gardner, which were subsequently used in the production of the film “Altar of Fire.” It also provides texts and translations of the material available on the accompanying cassettes. Finally, there are a Glossary and Indexes. There are cross references throughout, and each volume is separately introduced.